

Eli Washington Caruthers' Unpublished Manuscript Against Slavery: An Introduction

BY JACK DAVIDSON

Sometime during 1862, a little-known Presbyterian minister summarized the contradiction presented by the institution of slavery in America in a manuscript that would be discovered after his death: "It is strange, "he wrote, "that a Christian and protestant people, who profess to value liberty above every other consideration on earth and to regard it as indispensable to the welfare of mankind should exhibit to the world such a legalized and systematized course of downright despotism."¹ The author was Eli Washington Caruthers (1793-1865), the pastor of Alamance Presbyterian Church in Greensboro, North Carolina from 1821 until 1861. A disparaging public prayer for the Confederacy is the remembered cause of his retirement after forty years of service. The 1964 bicentennial poster for the Alamance congregation recalls the event that occurred shortly after the bombardment of Fort Sumter in April of the same year and the beginning of the war:

One Sunday in July 1861, he prayed that the soldiers of the congregation might "be blessed of the Lord and returned in safety, though engaged in a lost cause." A congregational meeting was held, his resignation was requested, and soon the ties were dissolved that had united loving pastor and people for 40 years. Dr. Caruthers was now infirm, and died four years after. He was buried at Alamance where a monument over his grave and a memorial tablet ... attest the esteem of his people for a pastor faithful, honored and beloved.²

During the four years that preceded his death in 1865, Caruthers completed a manuscript, over 400 pages in length, based on the text of Exodus 10.3, *Let my people go that they may serve me*. It portrays slavery anywhere as a violation of God's will because "slaves cannot make that entire surrender of themselves to the Lord which the gospel required and to which renewed nature prompts them."³ Dated 1862 and entitled, *American Slavery and the Immediate Duty of Southern Slaveholders*, it is now in the custody of Special Collections at Duke University. This article hopes to provide readers with an introduction to Caruthers' life and his manuscript.

Although it was never published, as a nineteenth-century primary source document of southern origin consisting of a scripturally based argument against slavery,

¹ Eli Washington Caruthers, *American Slavery and the Immediate Duty of Southern Slaveholders* (Durham, North Carolina: Special Collections Library of Duke University, n.d.), microfilm, 168, 369.

² Ephraim C. Murray, *A History of Alamance Church 1762-1918* (Greensboro: Alamance Presbyterian Church, 1918), 16.

³ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 313.

Caruthers' manuscript augments our understanding of the American slavery controversy's significant roots in a biblical debate. Emerging from the North Carolina Piedmont, it is important because it is a theological work of southern origin against slavery. Shortly after its discovery in 1898 John Spencer Basset wrote that "it is doubtful if a stronger or clearer antislavery argument was ever made on this continent."⁴ The antebellum struggle to theologically resolve the antithetical impressions resulting from the Bible's regulation of slavery alongside its emphasis on the dignity and equality of human beings is a quest usually attributed to northern theologians. Mark Noll's account of conservative Presbyterians' failed efforts to "rescue the Reformed hermeneutic from proslavery," as exemplified in the arguments of Charles Hodge, focuses on the prominent theologians of the North.⁵ He has argued that their relationship with their southern counterparts, theological ability, and public influence, best situated the northern Old School Presbyterians for developing a theological alternative to the literal, Reformed biblicism underlying proslavery arguments. Despite Hodge's brilliance and influence, however, reviews of his thinking on slavery have called it "poor enough to invite sarcasm" or like "listening to a phonograph record with the needle stuck."⁶ Hodge's response to slavery was, in fact, like the rest of his colleagues at Princeton Seminary: "timid, conventional, and unremarkable."⁷ Caruthers, a largely unknown Presbyterian minister in a proslavery state, arguably surpasses Hodge and other Old School colleagues, presenting a biblical alternative to the hermeneutics of slavery practiced in American Presbyterianism.

Caruthers' manuscript is also important because it does not correspond with the characterization of antislavery literature as biblically weak. The proslavery appeal to the Bible is determined by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene Genovese to be the foundation of the convictions of southern whites on the issue of slavery during the American Civil War era. In their view the defenders of slavery are the champions of Scripture citing "chapter and verse," demonstrating "impressive scholarship, close textual analysis, and skillful argumentation." Antislavery writers "failed to demonstrate that the Bible repudiated slavery" and "primarily ... appealed to the ideals of the Enlightenment and Declaration of Independence."⁸ The extensive development and application of the Exodus text against slavery by a southern Presbyterian pastor in North Carolina during the nineteenth century does not fit such an assessment. Caruthers' manuscript is an

⁴ John S. Basset, *Antislavery Leaders of North Carolina*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1898), 60.

⁵ Mark Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 413-417.

⁶ Allen C. Guelzo, "Charles Hodge's Antislavery Movement," in *Charles Hodge Revisited: A Critical Appraisal of His Life and Work*, ed. John W. Steward and James H. Moorhead (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 299-326, 324; William S. Barker, "The Social Views of Charles Hodge: A Study in nineteenth Century Calvinism and Conservatism," *Presbyterian* 1, no. 1 (1975): 5.

⁷ David Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary: Faith and Learning 1812-1868* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), 328.

⁸ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 7, 490.

important overlooked primary source in these and other appraisals of the Bible's role in the question of slavery in Nineteenth-century America.

In the Exodus text Caruthers sees a claim, a demand, and a reason that reflects the broader redemptive theme of the Bible. He uses this three-fold argument to demonstrate the universal application of Exodus 10.3 to the circumstances of American slavery. Historians have described the manuscript as "one of the most thorough condemnations of slavery written by a southerner" or "as sophisticated a polemic against slavery as could be found in the United States, North or South, in the middle years of the nineteenth century."⁹ The introduction presented in this article is limited to the first section of the manuscript dealing with his understanding of the text's claim, but first some further background on the author.

Eli Washington Caruthers was born on October 26, 1793 to James and Elizabeth Caruthers, on the family's farm west of Salisbury, North Carolina, three miles west of Thyatira Church in Rowan County. He had five sisters and one brother. His father is mentioned as "a very effective and efficient elder" in the Thyatira congregation. As a young boy he studied for several years with the Rev. Joseph Kirkpatrick, pastor of Black Creek Church, before entering Hampden-Sydney College in 1813.¹⁰ He left Hampden-Sydney and served in the War of 1812 for a short time before reentering school at New Jersey College, receiving a Bachelor's degree in 1817.¹¹ Caruthers then pursued the traditional course of study to prepare for the Presbyterian ministry, entering the newly founded Princeton Seminary in 1817, graduating in 1820.

Caruthers was ordained by the Orange Presbytery of North Carolina on November 21, 1821 as an associate pastor to the yoked ministries of Buffalo and Alamance Presbyterian churches near Greensboro, North Carolina. He served under the guidance of Dr. David Caldwell until the senior minister's death in 1824 at the age of ninety-nine. An indication of his early attitude towards slavery is revealed in a letter he wrote at this time. Written at the close of 1824 to a minister friend in Ohio, the letter mentions his interest in leaving North Carolina "to go to some of the western states especially to some state where there are no slaves."¹² Written at such an early date, the letter may corroborate John Spencer Bassett's opinion that Caruthers became antislavery during his training at Princeton perhaps under the influence of George Stroud whom he met there.¹³ Caruthers would never leave North Carolina, but remain as the pastor of the two congregations until 1846 when the combined ministry was dissolved, and he would then continue as pastor of Alamance until 1861.

⁹ David Chesebrough, *Clergy Dissent in the Old South 1830-1865* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), 65; George Troxler, "Eli Caruthers: A Silent Dissenter in the Old South," *Journal of Presbyterian History* June (1967): 95.

¹⁰ Charles R. Brockman, *Adams-Caruthers-Clancy-Neely and Townsend Descendants Composing the Adams-Legerton-Brockmann and Other Twentieth Century Families of the Carolinas* (Charlotte: n.p., 1950), 66-67.

¹¹ Troxler, "Eli Caruthers," 95.

¹² *Eli Caruthers to Reverend Joseph Merriam*, 30 December 1824 (photocopy from private collection).

¹³ Bassett, *Antislavery Leaders*, 60.

Over the course of his ministry Caruthers gained a reputation as a respected pastor, educator, and historian.¹⁴ Several published accounts remember a thorough and careful ministry to a congregation that included slaveholders. The more than two hundred of his sermons found in Special Collections at Duke University, written in a variety of booklets or ledgers, show studious preparation. Described as “a thorough scholar, an authority on theological questions, and an earnest and instructive preacher,”¹⁵ he was granted an Honorary Doctorate of Divinity in 1854 by the University of North Carolina. With two nephews as his namesakes, the minister was held in high regard by his family.¹⁶

In conjunction with his ministerial work he also taught or performed administrative duties at Greensborough Academy, the Caldwell Institute, and Greensboro High School where he taught Greek and served for two years as president.¹⁷ In 1846 he ended his pastoral relationship with the congregation at Buffalo. Soon after, at the request of the Alamance congregation, he resigned from his responsibilities with the high school to devote himself solely to his pastoral responsibilities. Having lived since 1838 in Greensboro at an inn owned by his sister Catherine and her husband, G.C. Townsend, he now moved closer to the Alamance congregation. In his new location he organized classes for yet another school that would later become the Alamance Classical School.

Caruthers’ views on slavery may have been known and tolerated by his slaveholding congregation, but when his dissent from the Confederacy became a matter of public knowledge, his retirement from the pastorate in 1861 was hastened.¹⁸ He explains his resignation as being “on account of bad health and for other reasons.”¹⁹ An early history of the Alamance congregation states that his prayer for the troops “was too much for the people who had risked all for a cause which they hoped to win” and that the congregation met requesting his resignation.²⁰ No congregational meeting for such a purpose is recorded in the minutes of Alamance church but Caruthers’ letter of resignation mentions a proposed meeting for some business.” He writes to the elders of the Alamance on July 5th, 1861,

Partly in conformity with a purpose formed more than six months ago, as you and the congregation are well aware and partly on account of my health which is such a[t] present that I shall probably not be able to preach much for some time, I would through you, request of the Alamance church and Session to unite with me in asking a dissolution of my pastoral relation. I understand that the congregation

¹⁴ Basset, *Antislavery Leaders*, 56; Troxler, “Eli Caruthers,” 101.

¹⁵ Murray, *A History of Alamance Church*, 16.

¹⁶ Brockman, *Adams-Caruthers*, 69.

¹⁷ Troxler, “Eli Caruthers,” 98, 100.

¹⁸ Troxler, “Eli Caruthers,” 95.

¹⁹ Eli W. Caruthers, *Richard Hugg King and the Great Revival in North Carolina* (Charlotte: Briarpatch Press, 1999) x.

²⁰ Annie V. Scott, “A History of Alamance Church,” *State Normal* (November, 1913): 92-93.

are to have a meeting on some business tomorrow, but I am too unwell to attend. Please bring my request before the church that the application may be made to Presbytery as soon as possible and oblige your friend and servant.²¹

Caruthers' signature ends the letter. While not conclusive, the timing and content of the note implies a connection between his public prayer for the troops and the proposed meeting. It suggests that he sensed trouble when he heard of the meeting and ended the conflict with an unsolicited resignation. If a meeting had been planned it could have then been cancelled. Described as one who had "no sympathy with the Southern Confederacy or anything connected with it," the life-long bachelor now became reclusive, according to his contemporaries "a sort of wanderer" and "little understood." During the last years of his life even longtime "friends were estranged from him in consequence of his unwavering devotion to the American Union."²²

A minister with ecclesiastical and historical interests, Caruthers authored several books focusing on the American Revolution period in North Carolina. His biography of David Caldwell, *A Sketch of the Life and Character of the Reverend David Caldwell, D.D.*, was the first of several installments on Revolutionary history. Caldwell was Caruthers' predecessor in ministry, a self-taught doctor, and perhaps the most famous educator of his era in the South. An essential figure in any history of North Carolina, Caldwell was the courageous proponent of independence whose reputation was only heightened by the burning of his library by British troops in 1781. In this work Caruthers created the singular resource for the study of this remarkable minister, "among the most illustrious of American citizens."²³

Another two volumes, *Revolutionary Incidents and Sketches of Character Chiefly in The "Old North State,"* and *Interesting Revolutionary Incidents and Sketches of Character Chiefly in The "Old North State," Second Series* are Caruthers' presentation of the strife between the Tories and the Whigs in what can be described as North Carolina's first civil war in the context of America's bid for independence. These volumes record history that would be lost apart from Caruthers' research involving interviews of veterans and those who remembered them, numerous accounts of cowardice and courage, and a detailed vindication of the actions of the North Carolina militia in the Battle of Guilford Courthouse.

²¹ Minutes, Session of Alamance Presbyterian Church, 30 July 1861, Greensboro, North Carolina.

²² Joseph M. Wilson, *The Presbyterian Historical Almanac* (Philadelphia: Wilson, 1866), 6, 350.

²³ Eli W. Caruthers, *A Sketch of the Life and Character of the Reverend David Caldwell, D.D.* (Greensborough: Swaim and Sherwood, 1842), iii.

When Caruthers died in November of 1865 at the age of 71, he left behind two other manuscripts. *Richard Hugg King and His Times*, subsequently published in 1999, recounts the story of King, a farmer turned evangelist, and his role in the revivals of Western North Carolina. *American Slavery and the Immediate Duty of Southern Slaveholders* has not yet been published, but is his most thorough theological and interpretive work.

In the first section of his final work, Caruthers argues that the Exodus text declares God's claim upon the Hebrews as their creator and redeemer. Combining principles derived from the biblical account of creation with elements of Nineteenth-century Afrocentrism as well as his unique covenantal theology, Caruthers explains why the claim of Exodus 10.3, *Let my people go that they may serve me*, applies to the plight of the black race in antebellum America.

God's claim upon Israel or any nation is based first on his relationship to them as their creator. They are "my people." God has created the Africans along with the Hebrews and all humanity and preserved them throughout history. The unity of the human race guarantees that if the Hebrews are God's people then so are the Africans. Slavery contradicts the order of creation, exploiting inequalities that exist within humanity. We can understand God's absolute right to creation, Caruthers argues, by way of our own feelings about the imperfect but legitimate claims of people to their possessions, inventors to their inventions, or farmers to their crops. God "has made everything out of nothing and has given to all men their existence" thus he has "a perfect right to employ or dispose everything as he pleases."²⁴ If the creator has made humanity "of one blood" then "for one to compel others...to serve him all their life without compensation, and to entail that compulsory service upon his unborn posterity, is unjust, inhumane and criminal before high heaven."²⁵ The claim of Pharaoh or of American slaveholders is "no right that can be made good in the court of heaven, nor at the bar of reason or before their own consciences...but God's claim is valid and cannot be disputed."²⁶

Moreover, in the creation of humanity God has already given "everything which makes existence comfortable or desirable."²⁷ The explicit declarations of Gen. 1.28-30 and their alteration after the flood in Gen. 9.2-3 are in view. "The fruits of the earth, the beasts of the field, the fowls of the air and fish of the sea, with the earth itself as the source from which the means of subsistence for man and beast are to be obtained include all that has been granted to the children of men by the Creator," he writes, "and all they can claim as their property."²⁸ "You may have the earth and its products," he warns, "but on your fellow man you must not lay your hand unless it becomes necessary in self-

²⁴ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 5.

²⁵ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 6.

²⁶ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 4.

²⁷ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 5.

²⁸ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 202.

defense or for the prevention of a crime.”²⁹ From creation Caruthers deduces a “fundamental principle, that we can have no right to hold any thing as property without an express grant from the Creator,” which he makes, “the basis of all my arguments.”³⁰ Everything that humanity should or ought to possess was expressly given by their creator but “all the rest, the world of intelligent beings, he has reserved for himself.”³¹ No allowance was made at creation for human beings to possess their own species. Humans are not made to rule over humans, only the lesser creatures. As such life and labor is marked by a measure of freedom, self-sufficiency, and self-determination which ought not be encroached upon by others. From the creation of humanity, Caruthers sees “great principles... distinctly given which are easily comprehended and are applicable at all times and in all circumstances.”³² In its historical context the text is God’s counter claim to the illegitimate demands of Pharaoh upon the Hebrews but ethically it applies to all situations of similar circumstances in the created order. It is on this foundation that Caruthers asserts the universal claim of the Exodus text.

Caruthers casts American slaveholders in the mold of Pharaoh. Just as his claim to the Hebrews usurps God as their creator, “so is the claim of all slaveholders to the services of their slaves,” Caruthers writes, “entirely false and consequently sinful.” Because the slaveholders have no such authorization from God, their claim, like Pharaoh’s, is “utterly unfounded.”³³ Humanity is in the image of God, created to enjoy God’s favor, and is his possession alone. Because there is no allowance for slavery at creation, American enslavement of Africans is a criminal action against God, “robbing them of their birthright and invading the prerogative of God.”³⁴

Nor, argues Caruthers, can the slavery generally found in antiquity justify American slavery. Speaking of slavery’s advocates, he finds it “strange that men of talents, extensive learning, and hopeful piety, would, in this nineteenth century and in this land of boasted freedom, science and general intelligence” attempt to justify slavery because it is found in antiquity.³⁵ If “every conceivable abomination” and “every possible form of injustice and oppression” and “every atrocity” and “every wrong” and “every species of vice” could be justified by its alleged antiquity with this line of reasoning, then the advocates of slavery are only demonstrating by this assertion “a conscious want of more substantial arguments or a careless indifference in regard to truth.”³⁶ If the slavery issue “cannot be settled by a fairer process of reasoning” than this, then “it had better be

²⁹ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 207.

³⁰ Caruthers, preface to *American Slavery*.

³¹ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 202.

³² Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 207.

³³ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 4.

³⁴ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 6.

³⁵ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 30.

³⁶ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 29, 30.

given up.”³⁷ Caruthers then devotes twenty pages of his manuscript to an examination of the histories of Egypt, Babylon, Greece, and Rome in order to prove that American slavery has no parallel in the ancient world. Not even in Egypt, he insists, did Israel’s situation reach such a height of inhumanity because there was “no intimation of an edict that their bondage should be upon them forever.” Pharaoh, he writes, probably “thought of nothing more than holding them under authority while he lived.”³⁸ Finding no parallel to the perpetual racial slavery of Antebellum America, he argues that the “alleged antiquity of slavery furnishes no justification of the practice.” And even if “slavery always has existed in the world and ... always will exist,” he writes, still “it would be no proof that slavery is right and that we or any other people can perpetuate it without woeful criminality.”³⁹

Joined to his objections to slavery on the basis of creation, are his objections but upon “preservation,” which describes the stability of creation under God’s continuing care. For Caruthers and his contemporaries, “Preservation” is the first part of a two-fold concept of “providence” formulated in Chapter 11 of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and elsewhere as God’s “preserving and governing all his creatures and all their actions.” Charles Hodge explained preservation as “the omnipotent energy of God by which all created things ... are upheld in existence, with all the properties and powers with which He has endowed them.”⁴⁰ William Sherlock reasons similarly, citing Acts 17.28 and Heb.1.3 to support the division of providence into “preservation and government,” the former emphasizing “that God upholds all things in being from falling back into their first notion, and preserves their natural virtues, powers, and faculties, and enables them to act, and to attain the ends of their several natures.”⁴¹

In Caruthers’ thinking, slavery violates God’s preservation of creation because it interprets perceived differences between ethnic groups for the purpose of exploitation, undermining the unity and equality of humanity established at creation. Any physical, mental, or external inequalities that might exist between people or races “subserve his [God’s] own wise and beneficent purposes” but the “inequalities which man has made...immensely increased the degradation and wretchedness of our race.”⁴² The use of “inequalities in physical strength, in mental capacities and external advantages” to justify slavery, in Caruthers’ view, is only “subserviency to personal and local interests.”⁴³ To the contrary, inequalities in the “variety of phenomena and uniformity of design” in

³⁷ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 30.

³⁸ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 36.

³⁹ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 29.

⁴⁰ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (1873; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 1:581.

⁴¹ William Sherlock, *A Discourse Concerning the Divine Providence* (1715; reprint, Pittsburgh: J. L. Read, 1849), 22.

⁴² Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 8.

⁴³ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 8.

the natural world constitute an instructive analogy for similar variations in humanity. He writes:

The hills are as important in their place as the lofty mountains, the rivulets as the majestic rivers and the lake as the mighty oceans, but must not be removed nor arrested in their course. The smallest asteroids have an important purpose to answer in the solar system as well as the mightiest orbs but must be left free to revolve in their appropriate spheres.⁴⁴

Caruthers intends all this as an analogous illustration: It is the Africans who have been “removed” from their home, “arrested in their course” and so the universe has been plunged into chaos. The supremacy of human freedom cannot be empirically proven but is instinctively perceived and supported by heuristic arguments drawn from the creator’s ongoing relationship with the world. Just as God “has made every planet and asteroid in solar system the right size,” he writes, “so he has made the earth and everything on it—every continent, sea, and river, every man and everything else of the right proportions; but has given man no authority to meddle with his arrangements.”⁴⁵ Just as the “mightiest orbs” move along their course undisturbed, so all humanity “must be left free.”⁴⁶ Caruthers deduces from both the creation and preservation of humanity that the “inequalities which the Creator has made to subserve his own wise and beneficent purposes” must never be used as the basis of the wrongful inequalities in the realm of “civil and religious rights.”⁴⁷

Caruthers believes that “if left to the unrestricted operation of those laws which the Creator has established the inequalities would not be of long duration in any one line of descent but soon change...” due to a process of “unceasing alternations of depression and elevation ... indispensable to the progress of society.”⁴⁸ Specifically, “an unvarying law” of human society is that “those who have acquired or inherited wealth and favor and high position gradually lose their intellectual enterprise and are left behind in the race of improvement and of social advantage.”⁴⁹ Such a law accounts for the experience of the African people. “In the early ages of Christianity,” he writes, “the gospel had quite an extensive and thorough influence along the Nile and over all the northern part of Africa,” a region populated by “flourishing churches” and the “most learned pious and useful ministers” but now they are treated “with contempt and rigor.”⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 9-10.

⁴⁵ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 251.

⁴⁶ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 10.

⁴⁷ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 8.

⁴⁸ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 9, 11.

⁴⁹ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 12.

⁵⁰ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 21, 24.

According to Caruthers not only were the early ages of Christianity times of flourishing for the Africans, but the larger history of the African race reveals the working of this “unvarying law” mentioned above and contradicts the presuppositions of racism. The creation and preservation of the African race is not without change or “vicissitude” that is found in “all the works and operations of the divine Being.”⁵¹

Caruthers’ thinking on this point is best understood in the larger context of the battle against nineteenth-century racism waged by Afrocentrism of the same period. Determining the degree to which he was in agreement with or influenced by the tenets of Afrocentricism – a universal history of humanity in which blacks are the founders and leaders of all cultures – is beyond the scope of this article. Regarding the debate over the world-wide significance of the ancient African culture, he might have concurred with Wilson Jeremiah Moses’ conclusion that “certain aspects of the so-called Afrocentricism have been sensibly argued” but are “unrelated to the fanciful exaggeration that African Americans are, in some exceptional or exclusive way, heirs to the civilization of the ancient Nile.”⁵² There is not enough information to know what Caruthers actually thought on the matter. Nevertheless, his emphasis on the change or “vicissitude” that is found in “all the works and operations of the divine Being”⁵³ and the elaborate ethnography found in his manuscript are both elements typically associated with Afrocentrism.

Regarding the Africans, Caruthers argues that “for long generations they appear to have been the superior race and ... long buried monuments of their greatness have been brought to light on the Nile, the Tigress [sic], and the Euphrates.”⁵⁴ He presents an account of an ancient Africa far more capable and accomplished than their nineteenth-century circumstances indicated. The achievements of their past were proof of the Africans’ capacity for greatness. The race of Ham is the “intrepid, earnest, and successful” forerunners in human improvement and development, “building cities and establishing governments” or engaged in commerce, ship building, and fine arts, while the other races displayed only “idleness and indifference about the future.”⁵⁵

Caruthers’ utilizes place names of the Old Testament to construct an account of Ham’s descendants, piling up famous personages of the black race, heaping up their accomplishments, while dismissing the rest of humanity as simple, pastoral, and unmotivated. Caruthers assumed, along with the rest of the antebellum world, that the Africans were, in fact, the descendants of Ham. Caruthers tells his reader of “a galaxy of men who were celebrated for their enterprise and generalship” or of “six African generals” who “were more than a match for the ablest of the Roman commanders” or of another African “who was certainly one of the ablest generals of this age to which he

⁵¹ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 9.

⁵² Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Afrotopia: The Roots of African American Popular History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 6.

⁵³ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 9.

⁵⁴ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 17.

⁵⁵ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 22.

belonged” as well as many “other names of note in history to which we cannot now refer.”⁵⁶ The ancient Africans “became famous in arms and carried on a worldwide and most profitable commerce, while all the rest of mankind were engaged in hunting, or tending their flocks, or whiling away the hours in idle amusements.”⁵⁷ Once the Africans “were the superior race; but, owing to a variety of secondary causes...they gradually deteriorated and became dispersed.”⁵⁸

Not only are the enslaved Africans the descendants of a once-great race, but the Americans who now oppress the Africans are themselves the descendants of the “Anglos and Britons and the Germans” who were “exceedingly ignorant, superstitious” and believed inferior by their Roman conquerors.⁵⁹ The enslavers of the Africans descend from those who “believed in signs and portents, in fairies, witches, ghosts, and hobgoblins” and “were frightened out of their wits by an eclipse of the sun, the appearance of a comet, or a play of meteors in the heavens.”⁶⁰ Only through the “humanizing influences of Christianity” over the past fifteen hundred years have they been elevated to their current position.⁶¹ “That the Africans or any other race,” he writes, “are of an inferior grade, as to natural capacities and powers is mere slang, the flimsy pretext of slaveholders, to conceal their pride and avarice.”⁶²

Caruthers’ tendentious account powerfully contradicts the claim of southern slaveholders to their slave property. Such a claim “rests not on any origin or express grant from the Creator but entirely on ...the pretended inferiority of the race.”⁶³ His ethnography sweeps away the basis for American slavery founded in racial superiority. Carl Degler has called it “an ethnological defense of black equality that is unusual anywhere in antislavery thought in the United States, North or South.”⁶⁴

God’s “claim on the Africans and all other races” is not only based on the creation and preservation of humanity but also on their redemption in Christ who “gave himself a ransom for all to be justified in due time.”⁶⁵ Caruthers explains Psalm 2.7-8: “I will tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to me, You are my son; today I have begotten you. Ask of

⁵⁶ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 20.

⁵⁷ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 19.

⁵⁸ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 249.

⁵⁹ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 25.

⁶⁰ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 26.

⁶¹ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 26.

⁶² Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 249, 403.

⁶³ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 249.

⁶⁴ Carl Degler, *The Other South: Southern Dissenters in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 30.

⁶⁵ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 61.

me, and I will make the nations your heritage and the ends of the earth your possession.” The nations, according to Caruthers, have been given to Christ, they are his “inheritance.” He explains that because “all nations were included in the cov’t [covenant] of redemption.”⁶⁶ Citing Gen. 22.18, Caruthers tells his reader of the promise to Abraham that “in his seed all the nations of the earth should be blessed.”⁶⁷ Thus, Africa and all other “heathen nations...stand pretty much,” he writes, “in the same relation to Him in which the descendants of Abraham, so far as they were included in the promise, stood to Him before their deliverance from Egypt.”⁶⁸ American slavery is therefore a violation of the “covenant of redemption.”

The “covenant of redemption” designates for Caruthers and Presbyterian theologians from the eighteenth century onward “the agreement between the Father, giving the Son as Head and Redeemer of the elect, and the Son, voluntarily taking the place of those whom the Father had given Him.”⁶⁹ Even those who did not adopt this particular formulation nevertheless spoke of “that eternal agreement between the Persons of the Godhead, on which the whole dispensation of mercy to mankind is founded.”⁷⁰ Psalm 2, cited by Caruthers, is seen as a particularly persuasive proof of such an agreement between God and Christ. It is a psalm ostensibly written for the immediate Davidic monarchy of its era, but which is also attested as Messianic prophecy by the New Testament implying a compact between the Father and the Son with conditions and promises, after the pattern of a covenant.⁷¹ While in the Old Testament the covenant and its conditions between God and Israel are explicit,⁷² other implicit covenantal forms like Psalm 2 can also be found in which a covenant is implied such as in the conditions and responsibilities given to Adam.⁷³

Charles Hodge, a nineteenth-century contemporary of Caruthers and the leading theologian of Princeton believed the covenant of redemption is “entirely beyond our comprehension” but “we must receive the teachings of Scripture in relation to it without presuming to penetrate the mystery which naturally belong to it.” He realized it is not “expressly asserted” in the Bible but many texts are “equivalent to such direct assertions.”⁷⁴ The lack of biblical grounds for the covenant of redemption and its implied

⁶⁶ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 62, 61.

⁶⁷ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 62.

⁶⁸ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 63.

⁶⁹ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 271.

⁷⁰ John Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, 2 vols. (New York: M.W. Dodd, 1849), 1:489.

⁷¹ E.g., Acts 13.13; Heb.1.5, 5.5; Isaiah 53.10.

⁷² E.g., Exodus 19.5; 24.7; 34.27-28.

⁷³ E.g., Gen. 2.15-17.

⁷⁴ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (1873; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 2:360.

agreement between the Father and Son was eventually questioned more directly by Karl Barth: “This is mythology for which there is no place in a right understanding of the Trinity.”⁷⁵ As a Reformed and Presbyterian minister Caruthers would have been in agreement with Hodge’s following criteria for a covenant:

When one person assigns a stipulated work to another person with the promise of a reward upon the condition of the performance of that work, there is a covenant. Nothing can be plainer than that all this is true in relation to the Father and the Son. The Father gave the Son a work to do; He sent Him into the world to perform it, and promised Him a great reward when the work was accomplished. Such is the constant repetition of the Scriptures. We have, therefore contracting parties, the promise, and the condition. These are the essential elements of a covenant.⁷⁶

Covenant Theology or Federal Theology was a central heading under which a large amount of biblical material was organized and interpreted by Caruthers’ and his nineteenth-century Presbyterian contemporaries. The consensus of the Westminster Assembly, however, regarding covenantal theology was not successfully transmitted to all of its theological descendants. Reformed Presbyterians and others committed to federalism have not developed a consensus among themselves with regard to the covenant’s soteriological role. Nevertheless, the legitimacy of the covenant form is mostly agreed upon within broader biblical studies. Recent scholarly energy expended on the study of the covenant is impressive and varied. Studies have tended to seesaw between the early twentieth-century judgments that the covenant did not become a working idea in Israel’s literature until the later Deuteronomic traditions and the later twentieth-century views of George Mendenhall, Walther Eichrodt, as well as others who view the covenant as “an early and constitutive notion in Israel.”⁷⁷ Recent work generally tips in favor of the latter, and the covenant’s place of importance seems certain in the earliest period of Israel’s worship of Yaweh. For Mendenhall, the covenant concept embodies and represents Israel’s underlying conviction that its social, religious, and even global aspirations, are important lawful expressions of the nation’s relationship to Yaweh.⁷⁸

The lawful dimension of the covenant is especially prominent in Caruthers’ emphasis upon God’s rightful claim upon the Africans. Caruthers sees Exodus as an expression of the covenant that authorizes not only God’s relationship with Israel but with all the nations of the earth. Legal and binding overtones of divine authority are

⁷⁵ Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, vol. 4.1 of *Church Dogmatics*, Study Edition, trans. G. W. Bromiley (1961; reprint, London: T&T Clark, 2010) 62.

⁷⁶ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:360.

⁷⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, and Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 418.

⁷⁸ George E. Mendenhall, “Covenant” in *The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. George Buttrick; 4 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962) 714-723.

sounded in Caruthers' use of the covenant promise against slavery. When he writes that "it was promised to Abraham," and reminds his reader citing Gen.22.18, that "in his seed all the nations of the earth should be blessed," Caruthers is drawing upon the legality of God's claim not only upon Israel but all nations.⁷⁹ Thus Africa and all other "heathen nations...stand pretty much," the Southerner writes, "in the same relation to Him in which the descendants of Abraham, so far as they were included in the promise, stood to Him before their deliverance from Egypt."⁸⁰ Caruthers sees the Exodus text as an expression of the covenant that authorizes not only God's relationship with Israel but with all the nations of the earth. God's covenantal claim upon the enslaved African in the nineteenth century is thus no less legitimate than his claim upon the enslaved Hebrews in the Exodus account.

In Caruthers' thinking enslaved Africans are "My people" because the claim of the Exodus text applies to all nations.⁸¹ The covenant is singular without temporal boundaries, lawful over all of redemptive history, and Africa is among the nations included in the Abrahamic promise as reiterated in Psalm 2. For Caruthers "the whole world was under condemnation and led captive by the devil at his will" but since "all nations were included in the covenant of redemption" in which Christ ransomed his people, then "no man and no act of men have a right to claim the services of any portion of his [Christ's] purchased inheritance."⁸² This includes Africans and Anglo Saxons because "both were given him [Christ] in the covenant of redemption and he has redeemed both by the same price."⁸³

For "the Christian reader," Caruthers writes, "it is unnecessary to multiply quotations" from the Bible in proof of his point, but not before he has cited Psalm 72 and its prediction of "universal homage." Caruthers sees the Hebrews' redemption from slavery as the pattern for the redemption yet to come in the person of the Messiah, to whom "every knee shall bow...and every tongue confess," and from whom "the church, in its ministry and membership, received a commission...to go and carry the light of the gospel to them that are sitting in darkness" and to "proclaim an immediate and eternal deliverance to all who were in bondage to sin and Satan."⁸⁴ Thus the claim - "My people"- is now doubled in its justification.

It is justified because it is based on God's role in the creation and preservation of Israel and all other nations. The unity and equality of humanity from the dawn of creation was grounded in their common creator. God's claim upon the Hebrew slaves of Exodus extended to the African slaves of the South. The enslavement of Africans, or any nation, is a violation of the Exodus text and in defiance of the creator's claim. God was the

⁷⁹ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 62.

⁸⁰ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 63.

⁸¹ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 63.

⁸² Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 61, 62.

⁸³ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 312.

⁸⁴ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 63.

creator and preserver of all humanity and, therefore, the only rightful superintendent of the black race.

It is also justified because it is based on the covenant of redemption. In the covenant, deliverance in Christ's name is proclaimed to the Africans because their nation is also his inheritance. As a Presbyterian minister Caruthers was committed to the expression of covenant theology developed throughout the Reformation and its expression found in the Westminster Confession of Faith. Although that expression has provoked critical dissent and substantial differences among adherents that will not be resolved any time soon, there is general agreement upon the biblical covenant as structurally circumambient, encompassing the relationship between humanity and God in an atmosphere of lawfulness, regulation, and security. In his view, American slavery polluted and clouded this atmosphere with its illegitimate claims. If the Africans belong to God through creation, and to their Messiah through redemption, they belonged to no one else.

Instead of acknowledging God's claims and "bringing them to the knowledge of salvation through the mercy of our God," American slaveholders had enslaved and kept the Africans "in ignorance, degradation and wretchedness, from generation to generation, without any crime alleged and without any authority whatsoever from the Lord whom they profess to serve."⁸⁵ American slaveholders therefore acted criminally towards God. They were violators of creation, preservation, and the covenant of redemption, claiming ownership of people who belonged only to Christ through creation and through a pact with roots in the ancient bond God made with Abraham, reiterated throughout the Mosaic and Davidic eras, celebrated in the psalms of Israel, fulfilled in the appearance of the Messiah, and was now being carried to the ends of the earth.

The argument from creation and redemption is only a part of Caruthers' development, but the significance of his manuscript for understanding the biblical roots of the slavery debate in Nineteenth-century America has hopefully been exposed. For Caruthers, the Exodus text gave a genuine social dimension to the Christian faith. It inspired him to see clearly that "all tyranny, injustice, and oppression of the weak by the strong are the outgrowth of depravity and are, of course, contrary to the gospel of the grace of God, the great design of which is to deliver us from this inherent depravity and from all its physical, social, and moral results."⁸⁶ Caruthers was not the only writer to make use of the Exodus text in the nineteenth century antislavery literature, but given his particular setting, the extended and atypical appeal to the text distinguishes him from all other participants in the slavery debate. Further study of his manuscript should have a place in the continuing assessment of the controversy over the biblical sanction for slavery in America.

⁸⁵ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 64.

⁸⁶ Caruthers, *American Slavery*, 110.